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Death as a metaphor in Ionesco's Killing game /

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DEATH AS A METAPHOR IN IONESCO'S KILLING GAME

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ABSTRACT

Eugene Ionesco confesses obsession with death and the human condition in his play Killing Game, in which a devastating plague descends on an unnamed city's population. The seventeen short vignettes present characters' various reactions to death, raising such questions as: Why must we die? Who or what has condemned us to this unbearable condition? How can we escape? The characters' inabilities to find adequate answers to these questions create profound frustration and anxiety. They are trapped by the plague, by the emotions it arouses, and by the misguided actions they take to avoid victimization. A metaphor develops--life as a prison from which no one escapes execution.

Ionesco's journals are indispensable in the study of Killing Game, for his personal philosophy is tightly woven into the play's structure and subtext. His deepest concerns emerge in imagery of death, murder, and alienation. The dramatic action is "stripped" to bare essentials, paralleling the thematic reduction of individuals to their collective identity. In his attempt to expose fundamental human anguish, Ionesco attacks social institutions as barriers that alienate man from himself and others.

Ultimately, the play offers no traditional hope, but by demanding active intellectual engagement from the audience, Ionesco suggests that the thinking process is about as close as any of us will ever get to a happy state.

Introduction: Ionesco's Theatrical Vision

Eugène Ionesco is by no means immune to critics of his work. While his first play, The Bald Soprano, was written in a state of relative critical naïveté, he has since admitted the influence of criticism on his writings, indulging in at least as much polemic and journalistic comment as artistic creation. In fact, Ionesco seems to thrive on debate and contradiction, acknowledging that "I have always felt the need to oppose something."[1]

The two central theatrical components which distinguish Ionesco's drama as profoundly unique are his vivid rendering of symbol and his comic manipulation of language. The way he combines these two dramatic vehicles is at once theatrically compelling and philosophically accusatory; his plays simultaneously attract and repel us. In a comparison of Ionesco with Samuel Beckett, C.J. Greshoff says:

> Ionesco is revolutionary for what he is doing on the stage and for what he is doing to dramatic dialogue. Beckett for what he is trying to say. Of the two Ionesco is undoubtedly the more inventive and skillful playwright.[2]

In his Notes and Counter-Notes, whose title itself

suggests contradiction, Ionesco proclaims that "one can dare anything in the theatre and it is the place where one dares the least."[3] From this we have the sense of the man who, above all else, yearns to dare.

Ionesco has long harbored the desire

> . . .to strip dramatic action of all that is particular to it: the plot, the accidental characteristics of the characters, their names, their social setting and historical background, the apparent reasons for the dramatic conflict, and all the justifications, explanations and logic of the conflict.[4]

Ionesco's artistic vision of a drama containing only that which is essential mirrors his existential vision of essential humanity; not only does he wish to "strip" his dramatic action to the bone, but he also yearns to "strip man of the inhumanity belonging to his class, his race, his bourgeois--or other--status."[4] Philosophically, Ionesco is obsessed with the unbearability of the human condition as it exists and has existed.

Although Ionesco resists having his plays categorized, denying participation in absurdist, surreal, or political movements, his work can indeed be classified as "avant-garde" in the sense that it supports the twentieth century phenomenon in which drama assists in "the destruction and renewal of modes of expression" (Notes, 133). Ever since he wrote his first play, Ionesco has utilized the paradoxical technique of

destroying the meaning of language in order to communicate more vividly. Critical and artistic appreciation of The Bald Soprano, for example, indicates that he has succeeded in this endeavor. Ionesco admits that

> To renew expression is to destroy clichés, an idiom that no longer has any significance; to renew expression is the result of a further effort to communicate the incommunicable. And this perhaps is the principal aim of art: to restore the virginity of an idiom.
>
> (Notes, 129)

Never more clearly than in his play Killing Game does Ionesco attempt to synthesize his artistic vision of what theatre should be with his personal testimony of what life is.

I. Reasoning about Death

In the English version of Killing Game, there are seventeen scenes. Between them there is no traditional order or rising dramatic conflict; the end of the first scene alone finds all sixteen characters dead, a phenomenon which leads Ronald Hayman to conclude that Killing Game is "the most ferocious of all Ionesco's plays. . . . I doubt whether any play has ever been written in which so many deaths occur."[5] Instead of conventional dramatic progress, the short scenarios are stuck together like the fragments of a collage, each individually provoking our emotion before it engages our intellect. A dominant image emerges from the cumulative effect, born from the inundation that begins in the first scene and continues until the final one. This image is a product of the play's meaning and its structure, fulfilling the dramatist's hope that

> Another kind of drama is still possible. More powerful and far richer. Drama that is not symbolist, but symbolic; not allegorical, but mythical; that springs from our everlasting anguish; drama where the invisible become visible, where ideas are translated into concrete images, into reality. (Notes, 229)

In the present study, I plan to establish the dramatic conflict in Killing Game in order to show how and why this content dictates its structure and dramatic

technique.

The play's central theme revolves around an unnamed, and therefore universally symbolic, community's inability to accurately explain the meaning of sudden death in its midst. When members begin to die of a violent and unknown disease, the living seek to explain the deadly source by reasoning within their own realms of comprehension: housewives gossip about the carcinogen in eggplants; men obsess themselves with belief in purification; doctors proclaim that mere faith in immortality will prohibit death. The people cling tenaciously to their flawed systems of understanding, trapped not only by the raging virulence but also by their own need to impose order on the unknown. The increasing silliness of their assertions induces our laughter because, as Ionesco says, "I cannot help laughing bitterly when I see all around me believing they believe, and being engulfed" (Fragments, 19). Yet Ionesco himself suffers from the intense need to define the meaning of death, and throughout the play a metaphor reflecting his greatest personal anxiety develops--life as a prison from which no one escapes execution.

Not even the seemingly innocent are exempt from death, for the first victims of the bizarre pestilence are twin babies. Because they are too young to have committed a deliberate offense, their deaths signify

what Samuel Beckett has declared--that our essential crime as humans is having been born in the first place. Ionesco personally supports this idea, asking

> Why have I been punished this way? Perhaps because I bit my fingernails or because I stuck my finger in my nose. The punishment is all out of proportion to the offense.[6]

The townspeople are equally unwilling to accept the possibility of an arbitrary marksman, for this would place each of their own lives in jeopardy. The infant's father's impulse to identify the perpetrator of his children's "murder" seems natural, even instinctual. He desperately claims, "If they've suffocated, someone strangled them,"[7] proceeding to blame his mother-in-law, even though her guilt can be absurdly justified only because "old women have always been a danger to society. They're always poisoning or murdering somebody" (KG, 12). Ionesco says, "It's to Death, above all, that I say 'Why?' with such terror" (Fragments, 27). The father's "Who?" contains the same terror as Ionesco's "Why?"--exposing the essential human need to understand the purpose of life, the reason for death. The futility of such an endeavor fills Ionesco, and, thus, his characters, with frustration:

> What a farce, what a snare, what a booby-trap. We were born cheated. For if we are not to know, if there is nothing to know, why do we have this longing to know? I can know the laws; I cannot know the reason for the laws. (Fragments, 32-33)

The children's deaths symbolize the "execution" to which human beings are subject from the moment of birth, their lives cut short by a merciless and unidentifiable killer.

II. The Perpetrator of Death

Death in the community coincides with the arrival of a Black Monk, who walks unseen by the townspeople, "very tall, black-robed, and hooded" (KG, 4). His title suggests obvious religious association, but no other specific references to religion follow in the text. Ionesco is more concerned with the Monk's general characteristics, drawing attention to his presence as a potential bringer of death rather than as explaining theology: "I am not interested in the mechanism of our movements, not at all; what lies behind, the Unknown, He or It, is alone worthy of our interest" (Fragments, 33; emphasis mine). Ionesco's triple reference to a Supreme Consciousness shows his preoccupation with "Its" ambiguousness. The more vaguely he draws the Black Monk, the truer the Monk stands as the "enemy" we face in reality:

> Anxiety takes the form of distress at being deprived of that familiar, indispensable danger which is concrete, real and visible, which can be attacked and against which one can defend oneself. . . . The enemy against whom I have to fight or from whom I must escape is no longer a man or a tiger but a whole army of invisible and intangible monsters. . . .anxiety is deadly. . . . I am threatened, but by what, by whom, which way am I to face? I hit out blindly into the void. (Fragments, 92)

As Hela Michot-Dietrich explains in her critical study of the play's English translation, Helen Gary Bishop's use of the singular for the title Killing Game would "lead us to infer that Ionesco had in mind a single power or individual playing a nasty game of dirty tricks on the population of the universe."[8] We might conclude that the Black Monk is meant to represent a singular God. But as Michot-Dietrich points out, drawing such a limited conclusion would be a serious error. The original French title, Jeux de Massacre, is plural, indicating that "Killing Games," a more exact translation, would aid us in extracting a more accurate interpretation of the play. Plurality supports the variety of games played between characters in various scenes and also furthers the ambiguity of the Black Monk's connection to death. He is not present in all scenes, not even in those scenes where deaths from plague occur, nor does he directly murder characters. Therefore, we cannot feel confident that he alone is automatically responsible for the plague.

At first, the audience might blame the Black Monk for the multiple deaths, seeing him as God, in the same manner that the father seeks to blame his mother-in-law for his children's deaths. But our human need to identify a concrete enemy where there may be none merely reflects the father's behavior--reason yields to

absurdity in our desperate attempts to justify death. Revealing his own inability to commit himself one way or the other about a singular God, Ionesco writes:

> It seems to me, too, it seems that someone, some sort of supreme consciousness must be laughing heartily at us. Perhaps this consciousness is not laughing, it seems to me that it doesn't seem to be, it doesn't seem to me that it seems so. (Fragments, 84)

Ionesco's inclusion of the Black Monk does not exclude the possibility that he may represent a singular consciousness, a laughing consciousness, who sets in motion the game of death, but the portrayal is ambiguous enough to suggest an alternate interpretation--that the Monk merely symbolizes death itself. In fact, these two interpretations are, I believe, intentional and compatible, supported by Ionesco himself, for "the unendurable admits of no solution, and only the unendurable is profoundly tragic, profoundly comic and essentially theatrical" (Notes, 20).

The play provides us with as little absolute knowledge of "God" as life itself, and, thus, mirrors the unendurable ambiguity that exists in reality. The dramatist gives concrete form to the city dweller's invisible enemy in the Black Monk so that the audience may literally see what characters can only sense abstractly. They are surrounded by "dangers that have no

concrete form, that are faceless" (Fragments, 92), and thus suffer from the intense anxiety Ionesco describes in himself. Perhaps it is tempting for us to forget during the dramatic performance that, once the final curtain falls, our enemy, too, will rise above us, once again faceless. But that indicates another game, the one played between dramatist and audience and audience and self.

III. Prisons in Killing Game as Escapes from Death

"Prison Scene" shows a man driven to murder and suicide by such fear. Initially, the jailer willingly confines himself to prison, convincing himself that isolation from the disease outside is his only hope for survival. He tells the two inmates:

> I never leave this prison. Here we're out of danger. Look how thick these walls are. Nothing can get through here, not even germs. Here you're in prison, I'll admit, but at least you're out of danger. You can consider yourself safe and sound. The real prison is outside. So go ahead and choose; will it be prison or death? (KG, 43)

The city has become more imprisoning than the jail walls because outsiders dwell in constant terror of and subjection to the sickness. The jailer purports to have escaped danger, but, ironically, in his supposed haven of safety he confronts a more devastating enemy--anxiety. Knowing he cannot truly escape death, he shoots and kills the Second Prisoner. Ionesco explains such violent behavior in circular terms: "We kill one another because we know that we shall all be killed. It's out of hatred for death that we kill each other" (Fragments, 26). The jailer projects the inexplicable threat that distresses him onto the man who physically stands before him. Murder is not enough to

relieve his anxiety, though, and "for no apparent reason" (KG, 45) he hangs himself. Unlike Didi and Estragon in Beckett's Waiting For Godot, who contemplate yet reject suicide as impractical, the jailer's ability to alleviate his fear through suicide gives him a power that Beckett's characters lack. In his article, C.J. Greshoff also contrasts the "visions of life" behind Beckett and Ionesco's work, saying:

> One feels behind the spare, wry dialogue of Waiting For Godot the presence of deep, inexhaustible pools of anxiety and pain, which, like a dam, this dialogue contains, but only just: were it to give way one would hear an endless howl of anguish: the cry of the cancer-sufferer. . . . It is no criticism of Ionesco to say that we do not hear this cry in his work. Nor do we find it in the brooding presence of the utter aimlessness of life, or of life seen as an incurable disease. Ionesco's world is far less disturbing. . . . His work deals with the illnesses not with the disease of living. (Greshoff, 33-34)

For Beckett, freedom from life is unachievable, even through death. His content focuses on the unbearability of existence, captured agonizingly in the final line of his trilogy, "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."[9]

Ionesco's material, instead, rebels against the inevitability of leaving, of non-existence, and thus engages the various methods which lead humans to their ends. Death alone can free Ionesco's jailer from "prison," from life, and while suicide does not present a necessarily satisfying option, it nevertheless

provides a choice--death as a release from life's "prison."

The hospital becomes another type of prison for Alexander in "New Scene" (the French title is "A l'hopital"), yet he has found a sort of serenity there because

> The sound and fury of the world outside is considerably toned down by the time it filters through to me. It is no longer frightening, or should I say, disturbing. (KG, 31)

After spending lengths of time in a hospital, Ionesco himself said:

> I should like to spend my whole life in a nursing-home. Since we're in prison, I'd as soon have this sort of prison. . . . Prison means shelter. I get on quite well with solitude. . . . My anxiety has not disappeared, but I can bear it better than I used to. . . . I settle down into my fear, I wrap it over me, I sink into it as into a bed. (Fragments, 90)

Alexander speaks of the difficulty of confinement to the hospital, yet, like Ionesco, claims that "afterward you get used to it" (KG, 31). In this scene, an old friend, Emile, comes to Alexander's deathbed in order to reconcile a broken friendship, "so that we could understand the hidden reasons for our misunderstanding" (KG, 30). We view Emile's anxiety in contrast to Alexander's quasi-acceptance of the human condition. Throughout their exchange, Emile's only concern is to determine the exact cause of their past rift, first

indirectly accusing Alexander of jealousy, then Alexander's niece of resentment, completely disregarding the original task--to make amends. Emile focuses on solving technical problems in order to avoid confronting the real issue--Alexander's impending death. His obsessive attempts to impose meaning on irrelevant past details reveal his deeper anguish, fear of the unknown. Alexander, on the other hand, wishes to change the subject, saying, "I'm glad to see you. Let's talk about nothing" (KG, 31). To want to discuss "nothing" reveals two significant aspects of Alexander's mental state: first, he wishes to openly acknowledge the emptiness of their current interaction because he recognizes its pointlessness, and second, he yearns to communicate the urgency he feels about acting in the present:

> What we have to say must be said at once. That way at least we will have made a place for ourselves in the history of expression. We have but one word to say; it will be buried with thousands of other words but not before it makes itself heard. But we must make haste because otherwise it will lose all meaning and become insignificant, outdated. (KG, 32-33)

He refers to a larger purpose: making one's life significant through artistic expression. He is, after all, a writer who is "working very hard" on "something important" (KG, 29), using his final energies to carve immortality through words.

In addition to his desire to express, Alexander

finds satisfaction in the creative act itself. Ionesco states that "man is above all a creative animal" (Notes, 124), suggesting that, as George Craddock interprets it, "imagination is a source of the joy of existence."[10] Alexander is attempting to find meaning in expression: not only through art, but also from human relationships, signified by his last words, "My friends." Yet Emile misses the significance of Alexander's farewell, anxiously questioning, "Why did he say: 'My friends'? What did he mean by that? He tried to get up, he was trying to say something important" (KG, 34). Their conversation reveals the failure of language, for they have been entirely unable to communicate, and so it is no wonder that Alexander's words are lost on Emile. Emile epitomizes Ionesco's "hollow man," as we see when he claims that

> Someone who thinks differently from you is your enemy. . . . For me a friend is someone who thinks as I do. To remain a friend he must change his ideas the same time I do. (KG, 30)

Ionesco believes just the opposite:

> What is important in a work or in an individual is not his resemblance to others but rather his difference, his originality, his uniqueness, his irreducibility. What is important is everything that I do differently from the others. (Present, 142)

Because of his inability to understand, let alone appreciate, Alexander's spoken or written words, Emile

represents the "grotesque" expressed by Ionesco through his characters, those who, as he says:

> . . .drift through incoherence, having nothing of their own apart from their anguish, their remorse, their failures, the vacuity of their lives. Human beings saturated in meaninglessness cannot be anything but grotesque, their sufferings cannot be anything but derisively tragic. (Notes, 186)

If the characters in "A l'hopital" were able to communicate that which they share in essential humanity, i.e. their remorse and anguish, then perhaps they might create a measure of intimacy together. Their inability to do so through communion leaves Alexander's artistic endeavor as his only viable hope for exacting significance from life.

While in the hospital scene lack of communication represents the linguistic prison humans erect from petty conversation, Street Scenes I and II together reveal the linguistic prisons of propaganda designed by politicians. Ionesco proclaims that

> What separates us all from one another is simply society itself, or, if you like, politics. This is what raises barriers between men, this is what creates misunderstanding. (Notes, 91)

Ionesco objects fundamentally to techniques employed in politics which serve to alienate people from their neighbors and their true natures. "Propaganda," he says, "masks a contradiction between the facts and the

ideologies that explain them" (Notes, 199). Fancy political slogans falsely convince people that progress is possible, that utopia can be established if only the proper magical ideology is accepted. By setting two equally impotent political ideologies against one another, Ionesco reveals a basic truth:

> No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute. (Notes, 91)

The two Street Scenes are complementary, juxtaposed to present two diametrical political approaches yielding the same result--revolution leading to a change in power in order to benefit the power elite rather than the people. The form of both scenes is identical, with "a politician standing on a podium haranguing the crowd, represented by three actors, and beyond the heads of the actors, the theater audience" (KG, 73). The only real difference between them is semantic--Politician One calls for "Revolt! Terrorism! Violence!" (KG, 76), while Politician Two promises "social justice through peaceful means" (KG, 79). Weighted with cliches and political jargon, the ideologies presented in both politician's orations nevertheless sparkle with promise.

This duplicity shows exactly what Ionesco feels to be the central evil in politics. "Personally," he says

> I mistrust the intellectuals who for

> thirty-odd years have done nothing but propagate different forms of rhinoceritis. . . . If I set up a ready-made ideology in opposition to other ready-made ideologies, which clutter up the brain, I should only be opposing one system of rhinoceric slogans to another. (Notes, 210)

The allusion to rhinoceri is, of course, a reference to Rhinoceros, the 1958 play in which Ionesco dealt more specifically with his anti-political sentiment. The symptoms of rhinoceritis are clearly present in the two Street Scenes, especially in regard to "collective hysteria." Of Rhinoceros, Ionesco writes:

> [It] is certainly an anti-Nazi play, yet it is also and mainly an attack on collective hysteria and the epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason and ideas but are none the less serious collective diseases passed off as ideologies. (Notes, 199)

We, as audience members, immediately recognize the vacuity of the politicians' ridiculous claims; the Ionescian crowd is not so astute. Proximity to the plague has apparently affected their ability to think rationally by creating a fear upon which politicians can capitalize; these manipulators exploit the plague much like Hitler exploited the German depression, blaming the arbitrary civic disaster on the government and, thereby, winning the citizens' support.

Ionesco's negative political outlook intensified as a result of his personal experience of World War II,

from which he developed a violent disgust for commitment to any party or cause:

> We are told that to belong to our own times we ought to join some party or other. This limits us and falsifies our essential truth. "Commitment," as it is now understood, is a catastrophe. (Notes, 126)

An example of how such a limitation can be carried to the point of self-annihilation occurs in the subtle conversion of the second character in Street Scene II. When this layman asks the politician for a clearer explanation of one of his idealistic claims, the first character angrily turns on him, calling him a reactionary and a fascist. The second character is intimidated into an alliance with the mob who cry "Down with the morbid and decadent government! Down with the death-wishers!" (KG, 81). In an effort to avoid a confrontation with his peer, he surrenders his individuality. To Ionesco, this sacrifice itself constitutes a killing game, in which the annihilation of free choice also means the death of the individual.

Yet another imprisoning institution that Ionesco derides is the scientific community. The medics in "The Council Chamber" are, in fact, just as political in their determination to create their own ruling ideology. They, like the politicians, seek to blame the government for the plague:

> The city's administration must be held

> responsible. The members of the Municipal Council should be arrested, the mayor and his officers, as well as all the other civil servants. (KG, 85-86)

The third doctor retorts, "They [the city's administration, etc.] should be put before a jury and condemned to death" (KG, 86), believing that he, as a learned physician, wields the power not only to give life, but also to take it away. Ionesco concludes:

> The learned doctors wish to be obeyed. They are furious if they are disobeyed. They do not like you to be what you are, they would rather you were what they want you to be. They want you to play their game, accept their politics and become their tool. And if this fails they would rather wipe you out, unless they can manage to prove that you are still what they want you to be, even if you are not. (Notes, 63)

Their tactics differ from the politicians, though, for they place science on the throne of God, seeing themselves as its divine messenger. They are so full of self-importance they claim that death does not exist for those "with strong ideologies to back them" (KG, 87), or for one who has "absorbed the knowledge of science, when one's mind is imbued with the theory and practice of our credo" (KG, 88). The Second Doctor pompously states that "If the rules set down by the medical association had been followed from A to Z, no one would have died" (KG, 86), implying that indoctrination leads to eternal life. Two of the physicians disagree with this credo,

stating the simple truth that "We are all of us going to die" (KG, 87). In the ensuing argument over whether death is inevitable or not, the medics reveal not only prevailing egocentricity, but also constrictive provincialism. Their fanatical commitment to science as humanity's savior leads them to explicate everything, even death, through systematic principles. Ionesco comments:

> It is true that people with doctor's degrees. . .can no longer understand, for they understand only through "systems" and tie everything to "systems" of thought, corpuses of ready-made ideas, different grids that prevent them, in a way that is almost completely natural, from embracing everything "different" that someone wants to say. (Present, 173)

Like Emile in the hospital scene, they believe that "someone who thinks differently from you is your enemy" (KG, 30). The doctors attempt to solve the human condition by relying strictly on scientific doctrine, believing that death itself can be eliminated by following certain dicta--dicta that, unfortunately, has been written by them. Its futility is ultimately exposed, though, for as they are crying "We shall prove that death does not exist for us. . . . Long live life!" (KG, 90), one by one they drop dead of the sickness. Ionesco reveals science as yet one more ideology in which doctrine, not truth, is served.

The old man in the penultimate scene is unable to

relieve anxiety at all; for him, it is all that remains. Trapped by intolerable conditions, happiness has forever eluded him:

> I can no longer live in our house. . . . I don't want to go back there and yet I know I shall. . . . I wouldn't be happier living outside of our home either. I go out in order to come back in. I come back in in order to go out. Each time I've left it was only to come back. Returning, always returning, and each time to one's self. (KG, 95)

Here, the self becomes the ultimate prison, for the ability to accept life comes down to a "matter of disposition, right from birth, one is either a refuser or an accepter" (KG, 93). Ionesco's philosophy is most concentrated in this chapter, where we find both a refuser and an accepter juxtaposed. The old man closely resembles Ionesco, his old age representative of one human growing closer to death, aware of the enclosing walls of life's prison. This scene is highly confessional, echoing the relationships Ionesco renders in The Chairs and Hunger and Thirst. In a journal entry that reflects the words of the old man, we see the playwright's description of the effects of an infinite weariness:

> I could have realized so many dreams if weariness, an inconceivable, enormous weariness had not overpowered me for the last fifteen years or so, or even far longer. A weariness that kept me from working but also from resting, from enjoying life and being happy and relaxing, and that also kept me from turning more towards others, as I'd have

> wished to, instead of being the prisoner of myself, of my weariness, of that weight, that burden which is the burden of my self; how can you turn outwards towards others when your own self weighs you down? (Fragments, 24)

The old man is kept from full communion with his wife because "there remains nothing but the weariness, the boredom, and the everpresent fear, ever since the beginning" (KG, 92).

The polar natures of the old couple represent what Mary Ann Witt terms the "dialectic of space." In selected Ionescian plays, she focuses on the conflicting imagery of closed and open space which develop from two basic states of consciousness to which the playwright incessantly refers.

> One is represented as a sensation of levity, evanescence, luminosity. . . . The opposite state, far more frequent, is the sensation of being closed in and weighted down.[11]

In contrast to her husband's overriding weariness, the old woman sees beauty in everything around her because she feels herself "fulfilled by the mysterious presence of the world that surrounds me and by the knowledge that I exist" (KG, 93). She is grateful to her husband merely for existing; she sends a "caress to every face I set my eyes upon" (KG, 92). When the old man claims, "I'm bored to the point of anxiety" (KG, 92), she answers: "How can anyone be bored? Do trees get bored? A road doesn't get bored. Lakes reflect the sky and

become part of it" (KG, 92). She expresses an organic vision of the world, and especially of nature, reflecting a naïveté that Ionesco experiences, though rarely. Witt elaborates:

> This state of etonnement, of a fresh, poetic wonder before the world, is described recurrently by Ionesco in his journals and essays. Always associated with light and space, sometimes with childhood and sometimes with creativity, it is a form of mystical deliverance available to every human being, a way of transcending time, evading determinism. (Witt, 317)

Being an accepter, the old woman is capable of giving herself up to love of the other. The old man is incapable of achieving such love because he is, in Ionesco's words

> . . .divided between love of myself and love of the other. . . . Incapable of giving myself up for the sake of others, incapable of giving up others for my own sake. (Fragments, 126)

Paradoxically, abiding love binds her by creating one wish: "I'd have no heaviness if it weren't for your distress," she says. "That is my only burden" (KG, 95). As the old woman begins to show signs of the sickness, the old man cries, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me. . . . How could I not have understood you? . . . We had joy and I didn't know it" (KG, 98). Witt sums up their pathetic situation:

> In his deepest solitude, in his encirclement by death, man communicates with others more than in the course of normal life or in any

group involvement. (Witt, 318)

They die in a poetic embrace, "take me with you into your night as I hold you" (KG, 98). Their relationship suggests only a qualified redemption: partial success because the old man ultimately recognizes the joy and love they have shared, yet also failure for having recognized happiness only because of her death, when it is too late to fully share life together.

IV. The Resolution of Death

The final scene in Killing Game presents the ultimate cataclysm: just as the public official announces the end of the plague, an all-consuming fire fills the stage, imprisoning the characters like "rats in a trap" (KG, 108). The meaning of such a catastrophe is quite obvious: fire accomplishes human defeat as surely as disease. The return to a naturally destructive phenomenon brings the play full cycle, much like the linguistic return that reoccurs from the opening to the last scene in The Bald Soprano. As the script begins to repeat itself in The Bald Soprano, we understand that the characters have been unable to grow; they are forever trapped in the pettiness of bourgeois living. The metaphor in Killing Game extends beyond mere repitition, for here fire presents a broader mode of destruction than plague. The plague attacked at random, killing some people and not others, whereas the script implies that the fire will destroy everyone, their possessions, their homes, their entire city. They cannot hope to be one of the spared percentages because the fire is even less discriminatory than the disease. Ionesco demands participation from the audience in several ways here, attempting to propel the characters'

anxiety into the theatre at large. For example, the consecutive screaming of "Fire!" by five characters on stage is bound to elicit nervousness from the audience, even if only at the subconscious level; this word in particular, being inherently endowed with the power to create terror in public places, is even more likely to engage our conscious reaction. In addition, the image of "licking flames," depending on how graphically it is staged, could evoke genuine fear in an audience. Secondly, the Black Monk silently enters and stands stage center; the author's directions specifically state that "no one on stage is aware of his presence" (KG, 108). He does not speak, nor does he need to. In an interview with Emmanuel Jacquart, Ionesco says:

> It is the image that is symbolic or significant. Visualization, as well as dialogue, is part of the language of the theater. What is new in what I have written is precisely this visualization. . . . Images are closely linked to spoken language, they matter as much as spoken language, maybe more. (Jacquart, 47)

The Black Monk is the "materialization" of an abstract concept. His dramatic function is identical to the chairs in Ionesco's play of the same name, though the symbolic meanings differ. Ionesco explains: "It's a symbolic language. The empty chairs represent both presence and absence for me" (Jacquart, 46). As before, the monk is present for our viewing purposes

alone--standing as a surreal objectification of death or, perhaps, of God--emphasizing his purpose as a theatrical device.

The third confrontational aspect occurs after the final curtain drops and consists of a direct address to the audience by a middle-aged and middle class man, beginning much like the ones given by civil servants to the characters as audience in previous scenes. He gets only as far as, "Ladies and gentlemen, friends," before he stops, clutches his stomach, writhes in pain, and moans, "Excuse me" (KG, 108). From this we infer that the plague has not altogether receded, that freedom from the disease was merely a fleeting hope. We are left with the image of his corpse being placed and carried away in a coffin, which we can just see through the open curtain. Ionesco states:

> A work for the theater is not a speech to the public; I therefore detest it when actors address the audience, unless it's to give an example of what should not be done and to parody didactic actors. (Present, 173)

The man's death aborts any intended didacticism on his part.

Even more important than a shot at didactic actors by Ionesco, this vignette reveals the author's fascination with the reversibility of reality and fantasy, a concept particularly suited for representation on stage. The spokesman's violation of

the theatrical "fourth wall" destroys the separation between character and theatre audiences. In previous scenes, Ionesco situates the audience in a position where they become an extension of the mob onstage; for example, in Street Scenes I and II, three actors represent the crowd and "beyond the heads of the actors" extends "the theatre audience" (KG, 73). There, Ionesco wishes to communicate that we can be made subject to the same propaganda that manipulates the characters. But as we are directly confronted in the final scene, the audience becomes the very mob itself, shattering, or at least confusing, the illusion of drama.

The boundary that separates life and drama, or reality and fantasy, is a precarious one for Ionesco. His experience of the world is often tinged with incredulity:

> I sometimes feel in this world of ours as if I were at a show. . . . An incomprehensible show. . .if I take a closer look at it, a kind of searing pain takes hold of me. This pain in itself astonishes me; this searing feeling itself is steeped in strangeness. I am infinitely surprised that things exist, and events and passions, and the colors and cares of both night and day, ephemeral though, transparent and intangible: the fruits of chaos. And all these shifting shapes conflict and collide in mutual destruction. (Notes, 215)

For the playwright, the real world appears illusory, incredible, fantastic--its very existence impalpable. Inversely, the fantasia onstage can become a nightmare,

more terrifying and more authentic than reality itself. Ionesco writes:

> We seem no longer to realize that a world we invent cannot be false. . . . I am conscious of being true when I invent and imagine. Nothing is clearer or more "logical" than something constructed by the imagination. (Notes, 47)

The world of Killing Game is not ultimately contained within the confines of theatrical illusion, nor is the bridge to reality completely crossed: the spokesman is unable to deliver his speech because death intervenes. In the final analysis, the playwright refuses to reconcile a clear distinction between reality and fantasy, for, in his opinion, "everything can be considered to be an illusion. Everything can be considered to be nonillusion" (Present, 115). The two realms converge, exposing both the actuality of illusion and the fiction of realism. The audience is abandoned in an inconclusive state, caught in a sort of purgatory between the dramatic and the real worlds. Viewer frustration often results, as Ionesco explains:

> One of the great critics in New York complains that, after destroying one conformism, I put nothing else in its place, leaving him and the audience in a vacuum. That is exactly what I wanted to do. A free man should pull himself out of vacuity on his own, by his own efforts and not by the efforts of other people. (Notes, 211)

In actuality, the play's lack of conclusiveness flatters

the viewers, suggesting that they are intelligent enough to draw their own conclusions.

V. Use of the Metaphor of Death to Encourage Human Connection

While Ionesco openly attacks didactic theatre, objecting to its intent to convert viewers to a particular viewpoint, his theatre nevertheless strives to elicit a change in audience members: Ionesco seeks to make conscious our participation in the collective human community. He says:

> A playwright simply writes plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message--a personal, affective testimony of his anguish and the anguish of others or, which is rare, of his happiness--or he can express his feelings, comic or tragic, about life. (Notes, 90)

Being against solicitation for a particular ideology, Ionesco instead calls for a simplicity that concentrates on elementary truths:

> The naivete essential to a work of art is lacking in the theatre. . . . I mean a simplicity that is lucid, springing from the inmost depths of our being, revealing them, revealing them to ourselves, restoring our own simplicity, our secret souls. At the moment there is no naivete, in audience or writer. (Notes, 23)

For example, he does not accomplish audience identification by creating characters with whom we can sympathize; he does not attempt to engender character specificity. Instead, he creates "characters without

character. Puppets. Faceless creatures. Or rather, empty frames" (Notes, 181). We do not fear for their particular lives--not at all. This forces us to suffer anxiety over death in general; together we experience an abstract anguish. His task is to destroy the peculiar barriers of communication and ideology that stand between us and our recognition of essential humanity:

> By expressing my deepest obsessions, I express my deepest humanity. I become one with all others, spontaneously, over and above all the barriers of caste and different psychologies. I express my solitude and become one with all other solitudes. (Notes, 48-49)

Thus, the flatness of characters in Killing Game becomes a vital and integral technique by which Ionesco can express the "collectiveness" of human beings while simultaneously condemning mass conformism.

If, as Ionesco claims, the fear of death is at the root of human anxiety, then what follows is tension between the individual and others. Balance within the individual depends on a delicate opposition between the self and society:

> Everybody has something to say. I am everybody or a part of everybody. I have something to say. This is not altogether true: those who are only everybody have nothing to say since everybody says the same thing they would say. One must be half everybody, that is to say, a little bit everybody, half others, half oneself. (Present, 41)

The plague is an unavoidable catastrophe, but what grows

out of the fear it induces are the numerous destructive games the townspeople initiate on their own, attempting to avoid solitude and escape death. These manmade games indicate a social dilemma: "It is fearing for our own persons and our own personal interests," Ionesco writes, "that keeps us from seeing things clearly. It is being committed that keeps one from dominating the situation" (Present, 67). Ironically, human interaction becomes yet another avenue through which we confront our finitude.

The various manifestations of anxiety explode in a structural collage where "there is a kind of dramatic progression in which the stages of development are different states of mind that increase in density" Notes, 122). The play's momentum is contingent upon the townspeople's reactions to the initial killing game: what results are tiers of social tension which lead directly to the creation of manmade prisons within prisons. No social institution is safe from exposure and infestation, for "the plague descends. . .like an invisible rain which passes through even roofs and walls" (KG, 19). Because there are no answers when we question death, we are forced to turn to one another with our anxiety and fear, which too often leads to violence and the purposeful infliction of suffering instead of true communication. Because to live really

also means to die, all life becomes a kind of prison where we wait for the inevitable.

VI. Ionesco's Communication of the Metaphor

Killing Game provides no solution to this dilemma. Instead, it presents people who are full of fear and void of courage in relationships where language fails and doctrine triumphs. Ionesco molds his play from "nothing": flat and superficial characters, an exhausted language, with death taking the leading role. From nothing he creates the "true temper of drama," which:

> . . .lies in frenzy; the whole tone should be as strained as possible, the language should almost break up or explode in its fruitless effort to contain so many meanings. (Notes, 29)

Ionesco speaks through the characters' inabilities to communicate, thereby presenting his ideas through action and mainly symbol, not through language. As is typical in Ionescian drama, most of the conversation in Killing Game is simple, banal, pedantic, and absurd. Linguistic sophistication is not Ionesco's style or concern; Germaine Bree encapsulates this consensus: "since in these plays the essential theme is visually expressed, language is in fact accessory."[12] Ionesco himself says that "the things my characters say are usually very dull, because banality is a symptom of

non-communication. Men hide behind their cliches" (Notes, 227).

In a comparison of the playwright with the 1920's and '30's prominent filmmakers, Alexandre Rainoff reveals important parallels due to the powerful visual comic and tragic elements:

> Ionesco is less dependent on language than a poet or a novelist. Wishing to escape words, he is able on stage to communicate more directly, visually, than within the limited medium of the written page alone.[13]

It is Ionesco's need to reveal the common identity of all men, and, thus, his primary task is to create a visual symbol of the essential human condition. If characters are unable to speak meaningfully through language, then the playwright must discover an alternative medium through which to express his ideas:

> I have attempted, for example, to exteriorize, by using objects, the anguish of my characters, to make the set speak and the action on the stage more visual, to translate into concrete images terror, regret or remorse, and estrangement, to play with words (but not to send them packing) and even perhaps to deform them. (Notes, 104)

But the yearning to put on stage what he sees in life--"forms, moving shapes, lines of force that conflict and annihilate one another, raveling and unraveling themselves" (Notes, 215)--constitutes a theatrical risk. As Rosette Lamont reminds us:

> On the occasion of the first production of The

> <u>Chairs</u> J.B. Jeener of Figaro declared: "The author succumbed, crushed by the weight of the very incoherence he was denouncing. . . . This is certainly not a play." (April 26-27, 1952)[14]

Ironically, the extreme banality and hopelessness that mark Ionesco's drama indicates its motivation and its meaning: the fundamental necessity to communicate our common, painful, empty identity.

Conclusion: Ionesco's Philosophic Vision

Although Ionesco hints that human relationships offer one possibility for joy, his characters undercut this potential because they are unable to give and take fully from one another. He suggests limited measures toward attaining at least some respite from the human condition, offering personal confession as one way to create profound identification between humans:

> If I tell these private thoughts of mine, it is because I know they are not mine alone, and that practically everyone is trying to say the same things and that the writer is only a man who says out loud what other people think or whisper. (Fragments, 20-21)

The Jungian concept of the collective unconscious finds prolific expression throughout Ionesco's journals and plays:

> We know that the conscious is determined and conditioned by the unconscious. But the unconscious is itself conditioned by a superconscious, by nothing less than a universal, a universal determination by the universal. (Present, 143)

He believes that encouraging our universal, common humanity by developing a nonpartisan mentality, "stripped. . .of segregation, of dehumanisation, of alienation by choice or party loyalty" (Fragments, 18),

will eliminate our taking sides against each other, our "goodness" and "badness," our hate. "This is the sphere of profound identification, this is the way to attain it" (Fragments, 18).

But instances of hope only vaguely glimmer in Killing Game's unrelenting darkness. George Craddock, Jr. states that "the theme of fulfillment. . .is a vital part of Ionesco's theatre" (Craddock, 15), yet all but a few characters in this play have forgotten to even attempt to achieve a measure of fulfillment--they are so obsessed with avoiding death they have no energy to even think about meaningful living. Craddock suggests that "Ionesco not only exposes the malady, he also proposes a cure: to recapture that part of one's nature from which he has been alienated" (Craddock, 19). The Ionescian methods through which humans can "break away from life's limitations," Craddock continues, are creation (especially artistic creation), dream, imagination, and thought. Yet only two Killing Game characters exhibit behavior in these terms--Alexander, by writing, and the old man, by thinking.

Ironically, amid the throes of the characters' despair, we recognize and marvel at the vigorous intensity of Ionesco's desire to communicate. A transmutation takes place: the stage-life is so vacuous, so lacking in any moral substance, that what

does not occur, what goes unspoken, becomes striking in its significance. Ionesco's true, secret frustration is exactly inverse to the action onstage:

> We ought to have but one single thought, one aim: the other person's happiness; we ought all to fling ourselves at one another's feet. We ought to consider ourselves and other people as we would a big fly battering itself against a window without knowing that one of the panes is open. (Fragments, 100)

The characters in Killing Game provide no example, no hope, except for what should not be. Too often, we, like they, "forget the secret of the gesture that frees, we forget how to go about waking up again" (Present, 159-160). To us Ionesco offers their world of darkness into which we must penetrate and discover for ourselves an alternate mode of illumination. He blocks our path in order to encourage our own creative and mental capacities, daring to place the ultimate responsibility on us.

ENDNOTES

[1]Emmanuel Jacquart, "Interview/Eugène Ionesco," Diacritics, 1973 Summer, 47.

[2]C.J. Greshoff, "Reflections on some plays of Ionesco," South African Literary Journal, 1981 December, 33.

[3]Eugène Ionesco, Notes and Counter Notes, trans. Donald Watson, New York, 1964, 46. Following references to this text will be indicated by Notes.

[4]Eugène Ionesco, Fragments of a Journal, trans. Jean Stewart, New York, 1968, 18. Following references to this text will be indicated by Fragments.

[5]Ronald Hayman, Eugène Ionesco, New York, 1976, 148.

[6]Eugène Ionesco, Present Past Past Present, trans. Helen R. Lane, New York, 1971, 30. Following references to this text will be indicated by Present.

[7]Eugène Ionesco, Killing Game, trans. Helen Gary Bishop, New York, 1974, 11. Following references to this text will be indicated by KG.

[8]Hela Michot-Dietrich, "The Massacre of Ionesco's Jeux de Massacre or Pitfalls in Translation," Translation Review, 1980 Winter, 24.

[9]Samuel Beckett, Molloy/Malone Dies/The Unnamable, New York, 1958, 414.

[10]George E. Craddock, Jr., "Escape and Fulfillment in the Theatre of Eugene Ionesco," Southern Quarterly, 1971, 20.

[11]Mary Ann Witt, "Eugène Ionesco and the Dialectic of Space," Modern Language Quarterly, 1972, 312.

[12]Germaine Bree, "Ionesco's Later Plays: Experiments in Dramatic Form," The Two Faces of Ionesco, Rosette C. Lamont and Melvin J. Friedman, eds., New York, 1978, 114.

[13]Alexandre Rainof, "Ionesco and the Film of the Twenties and Thirties: From Groucho to Harpo," The Two Faces of Ionesco, Rosette C. Lamont and Melvin J. Friedman, eds., New York, 1978, 70.

[14]Rosette C. Lamont, "Yesterday's Avant-Garde, Today's Great Classics: Beckett, Ionesco, Tardieu," Laurels, New York, 1985 Spring, 41.

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APPENDIX: VITA

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